



BOOK REVIEW

Arseny Kumankov. (2020). *Voina v dvadtsat' pervom veke* [War in the 21st Century]. Moscow: Higher School of Economics Publishing House

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Arseniy Kumankov has become known to a wider public for his popularization of philosophical theorizing about war. His new book *Voina v dvadtsat' pervom veke* ("War in the 21st Century") discusses modern theories of just war and their historical and philosophical contexts. This book provides a good introduction to contemporary normative debates in just war theory, but it also outlines the challenges that just war theory has to face when normative theorizing encounters the realities of current armed conflicts.

Among the four chapters of the book, the first deals at length with the main philosophical premises of classical just war theory and the relevant historical, social and political contexts. In the chapters devoted to modern war (Chapter 2 and 4), a more critical approach to classical just war theory is adopted. Kumankov shows that the traditional version of the theory is unable to adequately reflect the current situation and is thus gradually losing its edge. Chapter 3 focuses on contemporary political thinkers' more nuanced visions of different aspects of just war theory. The latter include the causes of war and methods of warfare that can be deemed just in the current political situation.

In our view, Kumankov excelled in contextualizing classical just war theory as the author analyzes the socio-political situation of each period that provided background of theorizing about the war. However, the attempt to theorize the concept of modern war is less convincing as the author outlines his views on the

normative potential of just war theory – even in its more ‘elaborate’ form – to address the realities of new wars.

Just War and Limits of Politics

The author emphasizes the connection between the origins of modern political philosophy and the emergence of modern warfare. The former began with rejecting the concept of punitive war and prioritizing defensive war. Due to the separation of politics as an autonomous and homogenous sphere, political space was open for the interplay of actors of equal status. As Kumankov suggests, nobody can impose on others their idea of what is due, nobody can judge others. Time and again this idea will be reproduced by philosophers, lawyers and state officials from the seventeenth to nineteenth century (see: p. 27). On the national level, this principle meant equality of citizens, while on the international level, it entailed the sovereignty of states recognized as equal agents of international relations. Within its own borders, the states establish monopoly on violence and therefore only they can legitimately coerce those who breach the state’s law and order. For Hobbes, a natural state of war of all against all necessitates a social contract whose execution is ensured by the government: By giving up the right to violence to the sovereign, they [citizens] instead are guaranteed a safe life (see: p. 24). The birth of a state as the main political actor makes state violence secondary and thus, in Kumankov’s account, a derivative of politics.

Subordination of violence to political interests of the state is extended to the relations of countries with each other. As in the pre-contractual state, people sought their egoistic interests and lived in conflict with each other, the states, in ‘postcontractual’ era, pursue exclusively their own interests. In pursuit of these interests, states enter into agreements that can be broken when their national interests change. Although such situation could be remedied by a government that would be supreme to the states and perform the functions of a supranational court (see: p. 24), this does not seem possible for international politics in its modern understanding.

Since there is no supranational government that would have the authority over national governments, the relations between them are based on mutual respect of each other’s right to self-determination, the right to pursue their own interests. Kumankov notes that in political practice, we should consider as the main mechanisms of managing the war the notion of the dominant position of the state (national) interest and the decisive significance of the balance of powers principle (see: p. 33). As a political concept, state interest or *raison d’état* implies that the state is pursuing certain goals, primarily, the preservation of the state itself.

In this homogeneous space, states resort to violence only if other states impinge upon their interests and only in order to put a stop to such encroachments; the ultimate goal of war is to restore the original balance that was broken by the intrusion of one of the parties. Kumankov observes that competing states are constantly searching for a system that, on the one hand, would prevent some states from becoming too strong and, on the other, would allow them to pursue their own interests freely (p. 36).

War is legitimized and regulated within the political sphere and so are the methods of warfare. Regular armed forces are the main actors in conventional warfare. The author comments on the changes in the status of the military personnel by pointing out that initially the status of a military officer was a class privilege (hereditary appointment), but the situation changed due to the increasing military professionalization and the special role of the soldier, and the concept of military duty (p. 41). At the same time the rest of the state's citizens are excluded from the military sphere and this distinction between combatants and non-combatants underlies the distinction between just and unjust methods of warfare. Violence is permissible against combatants but not against civilians. Introduction of regular armed forces thus contributes to the humanization of war since it seeks to limit the collateral damage.

Consequently, the author's interpretation of the evolution of modern politics leads him to conclusions about what reasons to wage a war are considered justified and what methods of warfare are deemed appropriate. The book's analysis, however, leaves out some important issues in dealing with armed conflicts of the "post-modern era".

The Concept of "New Wars" and Its Definition

Kumankov discusses at length what distinguishes the reality of 'new wars' from conventional warfare. The new wars lost their symmetry as a result of changes in the political sphere in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Today's military action often has to be conducted against irregular armed groups such as guerillas, insurgents, terrorists, paramilitary groups and so on. According to the international legal norms, these groups cannot be considered official participants of warfare: These actors of international politics challenge the state monopoly on war, representing one of the opposing sides or even initiating escalation of armed conflicts (see: p. 89).

Means and methods of warfare have also changed. Instead of classical battles between regular armed forces, smaller-scale, targeted strikes now prevail, which precipitates re-evaluation of the principles that the actors themselves are following. First, non-regular actors may be pursuing aims different from the eventual peace agreement and, second, the victims of retaliation are often not the regular military units but civilians. There used to be a clear distinction between just and unjust goals in war and harming civilians was considered wrongful. Terrorist attacks as one of the methods of warfare in the period of new wars, on the contrary, are directed against civilians. Their aim is to generate terror and wreak havoc. Thus, acts of a military nature go beyond warfare in its strict sense since the goal they pursue – intimidation of civilian population – is political rather than military.

Asymmetry as a characteristic of new wars is a rather capacious category that includes a range of other characteristics discussed in the book. For example, since the scale of armed conflicts is now incomparable with classical wars or even more so with world wars, contemporary wars are much less intense. Instead of large-scale frontline combats between the armies, modern warfare is characterized by swift, targeted strikes. As a result, both sides need fewer military personnel and the intensity of military action is also lower. Modern warfare is characterized by the prevalence of

high-precision attacks and the absence of clearly defined frontlines since new wars involve regular as well as irregular forces, which may be dispersed across a large territory. Low-intensity conflicts may last for an indefinite time for exactly this reason – that forces of one of the sides are dispersed and can restore their fighting capacity. Because the opposing parties are so heterogeneous, low intensity in combination with longer duration of ‘new wars’ is possible.

Since armed conflicts now tend to be globalized, which is one more important feature of new wars, any local conflict may grow into a global one and involve large international players via proxy wars (p. 103). Participation of large states in a proxy war happens at the expense of the local communities directly affected by the military operations. Depending on their strategic interests, powerful states may instigate a party to a conflict but do little of the actual fighting themselves. First-world countries no longer consider it permissible to wage a war on their own territories, instead lending financial or military assistance to one of the warring parties elsewhere. Since the clash of the key players’ interests is inevitable, these major powers, vying for influence and resources, act through their proxy surrogates in poorer countries. This undoubtedly reflects the asymmetry in relations between developed countries and third-world countries.

The author quotes one of the contemporary theorists of war Mary Kaldor, who pointed out that identity politics often becomes a reason for “new wars” (pp. 107–108). Exclusive identities, fostered by this kind of modern politics and foregrounding the national superiority, lack the intention to interact on equal terms with their opponents. Asymmetry is particular characteristic of terror, which is a frequently used “mode” of warfare. Terrorists as a political actor are not interested in participating in negotiations; neither are they willing to establish or maintain relations of mutual respect with other political actors. Terrorist’s political objective is to exclude the other from politics by eliminating the opponents altogether. Terrorists are difficult to identify because in their actions they strive to keep a low profile. In fact, they reveal their true intentions only during the terrorist attack but its execution depends on how successfully they had managed to keep the preceding stages hidden. Furthermore, terrorist attacks are not military actions but actions of political nature since their goal is to sow fear and panic among civilians. These actions are hugely disproportionate to the means used, because terrorist violence is used not in response to somebody else’s armed violence on the battlefield, which exists separately from other spheres, as it had happened during classical wars. Terrorist brings armed violence into the political sphere as a means of political struggle, which, by standards of modern politics, is an action inadequate to the content of the political sphere.

Since the author’s perspective is primarily normative in the book, Kumankov in order to trace the development of just war theory applicable to “new wars” in Chapter 3 focuses on the main philosophical contributions to contemporary just war theory. In other words, while in his discussion of the evolution of just war theory Kumankov moves from philosophers to the notion of war as such, in this case his argument takes the opposite direction. The reality of “new wars” leads philosophers to turn reflexively to the conventional theories and principles.

The criteria of just or unjust war come from our definition of politics since only a sovereign political actor is believed to have a right to legitimate violence. Does it, then, mean that asymmetry as a feature of “new wars” signifies the end of modern politics as a homogeneous space for interactions of equal actors? If yes, then does the theory in its normative mode have the possibility to provide us with an understanding of asymmetrical normativity? An example of asymmetrical normativity can be found in the medieval theory of just war which posits that the side that aims to restore justice in a punitive war has a higher moral status than its opponent. But in regard to modern normative theorizing, asymmetry despite featuring prominently in the realities of “new wars” remains, in our view, more of an instrumental characteristic. It highlights what is new in the practice of warfare today but of itself it can’t direct us to a new understanding of political actors. Yet, the latter – a new vision of political actors – would be necessary, because in classical “just wars” we are dealing with actors whose political status is equal, which is why war as an instrument of politics becomes regular. Asymmetry in war should in this case be pointing towards the asymmetry of political actors. We can consider actors of politics in the medieval period as asymmetrical since at that time a punitive war created asymmetry between the perpetrator and the state that sought to restore the order and justice. In this case, can medieval wars be classified as “new wars”? It hardly is so. The normative discourse labels a war as “just” if a state engages in this war to protect its national interests. Situations where the right of nations to self-determination is questioned by a certain aggressor without a valid reason include defensive war, preventive war, military aid, and humanitarian intervention, all of which are discussed in Chapter 3. Contemporary studies analyzed by the author in this chapter adopt the traditional notions of classical just war theory to the current situation. The key concept in this respect is that of national interest, since it is the countries’ respect for each other’s national interests that ensures political stability on the international arena. While asymmetry is a key characteristic of modern warfare, in politics asymmetrical actors are not always guided by the principle of mutual counterbalancing. The description of the evolution of classical just war theory demonstrates the connection between the changes in the perception of politics and rules of warfare. It remains unclear, however, why the author did not show such connection for new wars. However, it might not have been his primary purpose. The book *Voina v dvadtsat’ pervom veke* (“War in the 21st Century”) summarizes the main approaches to the questions of just war theory, namely, when can war be justifiable and what means and methods of warfare are acceptable. The book provides a comprehensive overview of the main questions of normative theorizing by classical and contemporary theorists on war, which is a major step in remedying the asymmetry between international and Russian academic reflections on war.